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Imagining Community: Women's Ice Hockey, High Performance Sport and Rural Survival in Southern Alberta

Project Summary

Statistics Canada data indicate that by 1931, more citizens (54%) lived in urban centres than rural communities. By 2006, this percentage had reached 80%. This demographic shift has serious ramifications for rural communities. For Warner, a Southern Alberta agricultural-based community of approximately 380 persons, a unique strategy was adopted to imagine a sense of community and to allow its residents the choice to remain 'in place' (Epp and Whitson, 2001). Located 65 km south of Lethbridge, the village was threatened with the potential closure of the consolidated Kindergarten to Grade 12 school (ages 5-17). The citizens of Warner established a high performance hockey academy as a stratagem to save the school, and implicitly the town itself. The purpose of this research was to examine what impact on the village was realized, with the creation of the Warner Hockey School (WHS) for young women. The case study research investigated the potential that high performance sport might play in rural community survival and revitalization.

The specific objectives of the project were to identify and analyze:

- Why the WHS was established and the process that the community undertook to make the school a reality
- How the 'imagined community' of Warner came to include high performance hockey as defined by the coaches, players and community
- The role of elite hockey academies in the Canadian hockey system and the impact of such schools on women's hockey
- The potential that high performance sport might play in Canadian rural survival

Research Methods

A case study design, with multiple qualitative data collection strategies, was utilized:

- Analysis of school and community documents related to the establishment and operations of the WHS;
- Semi-structured interviews with community members, school and hockey school staff, informed hockey experts, and past players (n=32);
- Participant observation at village council meetings, school events, hockey galas showcase camps, and games.

Research Results

Uncertainty despite success

Research on endangered North American communities indicates that schools, as integral community institutions, play a vital role in rural communities threatened by decline. Since 2003, the WHS has helped Warner accomplish its central goal – to retain kindergarten to grade 12 schooling. The WHS is a nationally and

internationally recognized elite hockey program. In 2015, the Warner Warriors won the North American Junior Women's Hockey League (JWHL) title. Over 90 percent of WHS players pursue their hockey careers at the post-secondary level, many with athletic scholarships at Canadian and American universities.

Most Warner interviewees declare emphatically that the WHS "saved the village." It brought people together to proactively image a solution to their declining community. Yet, despite the WHS success and community commitment, the village and WHS are at a crossroads. On the one hand, the hockey academy has achieved success and the school has remained open and viable. On the other, the WHS visibility and team success has not led to community revitalization or development. Although popular narratives about the creation of the school speak to consensus building and group cohesion, in reality the hockey school appears to have divided the community. As some community members realized that the school was not going to have the economic and developmental impacts initially desired and expected, it was difficult to remain supportive of the costly and time consuming initiative. Volunteer burnout was a reality. Citizens who had invested countless hours and resources (personal time, labour, and financial) in the WHS became increasingly skeptical of the impact the academy was having on the village. This has resulted in villager dissonance, those who remain supportive of the WHS and those who are uneasy with the expected support of the hockey team when tangible, visible community benefits do not appear to be forthcoming.

Imagining Community

For the Warner resident, often with close-knit intergenerational ties, there is a strong connection to history: of the town, family and school. The hockey players, while invited and welcomed, do not share this same intimate connection and the village's future prosperity. Tensions simmer as the "intruder" players join an established rural community. Inevitably, players view Warner as a timely destination, chosen because it allows one to pursue excellence in her sport and to earn the necessary high school diploma that could potentially lead to a university hockey scholarship. Warner is not "home" but a temporary stopover towards sporting excellence and educational advancement.

Players who attend the WHS Showcase tryout, do so with a specific model of the game in their collective consciousness; one comes to work, to become technically more skilled. Once chosen to attend the Academy, important decisions must be made. Annual fees currently are \$33,000.00 per year. This is a serious financial outlay for which the player is responsible. Young women come to Warner, seeking quality hockey coaching, excellent competition, and in pursuit of the future university hockey scholarship.

A Culture Of Elitism: Opportunity and Threat

In 2000, Julie Stevens (2000, p.136) offered an assessment of female hockey writing "a formidable gap has emerged within the female hockey system separating the local game from the global forum." Over the last decade, a culture of elitism, professionalism, and commerce has come to saturate the game. In 2003 when the WHS opened its doors to the first recruits, it was only the second girl's hockey school in Canada. Now there are more than a dozen from coast to coast vying for girls to register in their programs. Increasingly, families who can afford the tuition fees are enrolling their children in elite hockey programs. The WHS's future is threatened by this growing popularity of elite female hockey. The tiny Warner village has little to offer players, other than quality schooling and hockey training in a small rural environment. Other amenities are scarce or non-existent. With the increase in hockey academies, Warner needs to adopt a unique promotional strategy to differentiate itself from other schools, many of them in larger urban centres with lower enrollment fees. The WHS is therefore, not an uncomplicated success story by which a small rural community turned to

sport as a way to “save the town.” The paradox for Warner is that while the success of WHS is a cause for celebration, the very existence of WHS is threatened by the rising elitism of female hockey nationwide. This juxtaposition calls into question the future of the WHS and the survival of this small rural community.

Policy Implications

Results were consistent with past research that suggests there is a rising culture of elitism in female hockey. Hockey academies, such as the WHS, are highly sought out as paths to specialized coaching, increased skill development, post-secondary athletic scholarship offers, and possible selection to elite national and international teams.

Next Steps

Further research is needed on the impact of high performance sport academies in rural and urban communities across Canada and the benefits provided for athletes, community members and the associated schools.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Hockey Canada; Hockey Alberta and other provincial governing bodies, post-secondary institutions that recruit graduate players.

Sport Canada – research support that Sport Canada provides is vital (and should be enriched and sustained) to investigate changing trends in elite and grassroots sport to assess the benefits and impacts of new initiatives.